

Posted by Joel Walsh, Washington Bureau

Whether or not Orange County water providers will get \$26 million in federal money to expand the county's water supply may be in the hands of Rep. Loretta Sanchez.

A Republican pledge to suspend all federal earmarks means Sanchez, the delegation's only Democrat, is the one local agencies can turn to for help.

Republican members of Congress are swearing off pork-barrel spending this year in an effort, they say, to reduce the federal debt and encourage more prudent spending. Sanchez, on the other hand, has said that earmarks are necessary to provide vital funding for local projects.

During a Capitol Hill luncheon hosted by the Orange County Water District, Sanitation District and the Water Replenishment District of Southern California on Thursday, **Rep. John Campbell, R-Irvine**

praised local officials for their success on a range of projects, including the Groundwater Replenishment System, a Fountain Valley plant that turns recycled wastewater into drinking water.

But, **Campbell** told them, **"Your next challenge is going to be able to (expand the plant) without any federal money, because the entitlements we have are eating up more and more and more of the federal budget."**

His thoughts were echoed by Rep. Gary Miller, who joined four of the delegation's six lawmakers last year in asking for millions of dollars in funding for recycled water projects.

"I've really enjoyed working with you," Miller, R-Diamond Bar, told the water representatives. But, he added, "It will be a little more difficult this year with the earmark situation - something that I have a problem with because I've always believed in really helping the local community."

Water district general manager Mike Markus acknowledged that it's going to be a challenge to get federal funding for the projects his group came to Washington to promote. But he said he's

hopeful that Sanchez, D-Santa Ana, will soon introduce a bill that would include money for them.

Markus said the districts' primary goal is getting \$26 million in federal dollars to expand the Fountain Valley plant. The price tag for the whole project is \$129 million.

The county's recycled water system provides between 15 to 25 percent of the drinking water supply for roughly 2.3 million residents in northern and central Orange County.

If expanded, its capacity would grow by 25 percent.

Sanchez, who did not attend Thursday's luncheon, has not committed to including funding for the water recycling plant in an upcoming bill, but she released the following statement:

"I think it's unfortunate that other members of our delegation will no longer be able to support funding for Orange County's groundbreaking water projects, but I am committed to continuing to advocate for forward-thinking initiatives that help create new sources of water and improve wastewater systems in our community."

According to the water district, Orange County needs to expand its recycling capabilities to make it less reliant on imported water from the Colorado River and California Bay Delta.

"We want to lessen the dependence on those imported supplies, not to mention, it's the environmentally right thing to do," said water district spokeswoman Gina DePinto. "We're sending billions of gallons of treated sewage out to the Pacific Ocean whereas we could be treating it and actually using it for drinking water, industrial use and landscape."

DePinto didn't say exactly how much the water representatives' three-day trip to Washington would cost Orange County ratepayers, but she ball parked the figure at about \$10,000 - to be split between the Orange County hosts.

She said the main costs for the trip were for travel and the luncheon, which she saw as a way to ensure better attendance.

DePinto said lobbying efforts in Washington are a must. She said the Groundwater Replenishment System was made possible, in part, with \$90 million in state and federal grants.

"It helps pay for these projects so the general public doesn't have to," she said.